Bristol Food Union

Building food community for the future
Responding to a crisis: what happened?

• On March 17\textsuperscript{th}, 2020, with the Covid crisis looming, Prime Minister Boris Johnson advised the British public to stay away from hospitality businesses.

• An emergency meeting was held, and an idea formed to launch an independent restaurant collective. An informal group of the city’s restaurants would collaborate to defend their livelihoods, whilst also supporting the city’s emergency food response.

• By March 27\textsuperscript{th} the idea had expanded to include businesses from across the city’s food & hospitality sectors, including cafes, street-food traders, caterers, specialist wholesalers, local food producers and more. Bristol Food Union was developed to drive public support & lobby for the city’s independent food & drink businesses.

• Ten days after the idea was formed, Bristol Food Union launched with a strong social media identity, website & crowd-funding campaign. We asked for public support with two key areas of activity…
1. Feeding the frontline: meals service

- We would provide food to those who needed access during the lockdown, whilst also helping to tackle the immediate economic crisis in the hospitality industry. We designed a model to generate funds from the public, so we could cook and deliver meals to the NHS frontline.

- Raise money from the public via a crowd-funding campaign
- Pay restaurants at £4 p/meal to produce high-quality, nutritious ready meals to feed the frontline
- Keep some teams in the kitchens
- Keep some funds moving down the hospitality supply chain
- Get food to those that were going to need to be sustained during the crisis

Win win!
Feeding the frontline: achieved

- Between March-July 2020 our public crowd-funding campaign raised: £43,350.00
- Food Union supporter, Robert del Naja of Bristol band Massive Attack, sold a one-off piece of artwork and raised £105,895.00 for the campaign. We secured small amounts of grant funding from Bristol City Council, Feeding Bristol, and the National Benevolent Fund
- From March-July end, we distributed £63,243.00 to 10 of the city’s restaurants, cafes & caterers to produce 12,000 high-quality nutritious meals for NHS workers, mental health facilities, schools, and other essential services
- We registered 137 volunteers to help as: logistics support and delivery drivers, comms team and social media specialists, kitchen staff and chefs
- We employed 2 young people from Bristol University and UWE as interns to help in the office
- We created 3 Covid-secure food production and distribution hubs around the city (Kensington Arms, Yurt Lush, Ashton Gate Stadium)
- By June 2020, as it became clear the NHS were through the worst of the Bristol crisis, so we refocused our activities to provide meals for vulnerable individuals and community groups across the city. We supplied National Food Service, Coexist Community Kitchen, Baraka Community kitchen, Project Mama and others, with a regular supply of nutritious, high-quality ready meals until August 31st.

Robert del Naja of Bristol band, Massive Attack volunteering at the Coexist Community Kitchen in Easton
Lockdown 1: stats

• We spent £11,937.00 supplying nutritious, culturally-appropriate ready meals to the National Food Service

• We spent £63,243.00 with local restaurants and community on the production of meals for both vulnerable communities and the NHS

• We funded a community food hub at Jamaica Street Stores, with the People’s Republic of Stokes Croft, to support their pay-what-you-feel lunch service

• We helped to fund a new food hub at the St Werburgh’s Community Centre, offering food-bank access to low income and vulnerable families in the area
Feeding the frontline: learnings

• Bristol’s food and hospitality industry have a beneficial role to play in supporting community food / food access projects

• The Food Union focused on nutritious, high-quality ready-meals, and access to fresh fruit and vegetables. There is further scope to consider issues around quality, nutrition and taste as a key part of the approach to Bristol’s food poverty and access strategy

• A core group of 12 restaurants, caterers and cafes benefitted financially from the scheme. If the scheme were to continue, it should be expanded to a wider, more diverse group of the city’s food businesses

• Restaurants generally spent budget with larger food-service caterers (Castell Howell, Brakes & Bidfood). This spend would have a greater impact on the regional economy if it was distributed through more local businesses, farmers & food producers.
2. Shop Bristol Food: retail listings

• When lockdown hit, in collaboration with Bristol Food Producers, we began to list all the food shops, delis, cafes, restaurants, and community kitchens, with details of who was open, closed, switched to delivery, or doing takeaways.

• We created a ‘Shop Bristol Food’ retail platform and listed more than 200 of the city’s independent food businesses, with each given a profile, photo and social media support to promote their activities.

• We ran a responsive and constantly evolving social media campaign, to keep the public informed on how best to help support local food businesses through the crisis.

• We channeled offers of surplus product from the hospitality industry shutdown into donations for frontline meals, and to Caring in Bristol’s provision for the city’s homeless citizens.
Shop Bristol Food: learnings

- Small to medium sized food enterprises that didn’t already have a strong online presence benefitted significantly from being promoted through Food Union channels. Traders reported an increase in customer awareness & direct sales as a result of participating in the Food Union’s social media campaigns.

- Food business owners benefitted from feeling part of a wider food community, they reported feeling less isolated and more connected to others in the city.

- The Food Union ran regular group calls for Bristol’s food businesses, advising on issues such as furlough, grant support and bounce-back loans. These were delivered in partnership with our legal partners at Bevas Brittan. Participants found access to free support beneficial for explaining a complex and fast-moving policy environment.

- There is space in the market for an organisation offering similar membership benefits to that of a traditional ‘Union,’ but focused on supporting independently owned, ethically minded food enterprises.
Feeding communities: Food provisions boxes

• As a result of participating in a weekly city food strategy call (organised by Feeding Bristol) BCC children’s services commissioned the Food Union to provide a weekly box of food provisions to 105 vulnerable young people, who had recently left the foster care system.

• Working with Tessa Lidstone of Box-e Restaurant, we provided weekly food provisions from April - July end. 2,000 weekly food boxes were delivered in total, with a particular focus on products that were of interest / appealing to young people.

• Tessa took a highly individualised approach to these boxes, liaising with council care-workers to identify those with children, birthdays, or special circumstances. We worked to ensure that extra items, or special presents were included where appropriate.

• Over time we developed a strong, positive relationship with the council's children's services department. Tessa Lidstone worked to organise a weekly cook along, where young people were supplied ingredients & instructions via a video in a closed Facebook group.
Weekly food boxes: Lockdown 1 stats

- We spent £9,200.00 to deliver over 2,000 weekly food boxes to foster-care leavers across the city

- Tessa Lidstone of Box-e Restaurant organized ingredients & recipe cards to support food learning and cooking skills for foster care leavers

- We spent £10,200.00 on 450 weekly food provision boxes for refugee and asylum-seeking families referred through Project Mama & others

- We spent £9,000.00 supplying fresh fruit & vegetables to the Easton Cowboys for their weekly veg box scheme, providing low-income families with access to fresh produce
Over the summer months our focus shifted to supporting the re-opening of hospitality businesses in the city.

When businesses re-opened in July, the Food Union ran a campaign encouraging the public to spend their ‘Eat Out to Help Out’ vouchers with the independents.

We distributed window stickers to 70 participating hospitality businesses, encouraging the public to ‘Eat Independent, Support Local.’

We ran a social and communications campaign to encourage the public to eat with the independents, and avoid multinational chains where possible.
Summer 2020: No more No Shows

• We collaborated with Manchester-based, hospitality recruitment agency 68 people, to run their ‘No More’ No Shows’ campaign in Bristol

• Over 440 campaign posters went up across the city, driving home the 'No More, No Shows’ message thanks to a generous donation from Out of Hand

• We ran an active social-media campaign, highlighting to the public the very real, financial impact of failing to honour their restaurant reservations
Summer 2020: learnings

- A space exists in the market for a creative organisation to deliver engaging public campaigns, designed to drive specific action on behalf of our food and hospitality businesses – and in support of the city’s wider good food strategy

- There exist common issues that impact different types of food and hospitality businesses. Public education and understanding on these issues would be beneficial to growing public participation and engagement with the city’s food community

- In Bristol, we benefit from an actively supportive buying public. The number of consumers willing to spend a little more to support ethical, independent food businesses is much stronger than elsewhere in the UK

- The city would benefit from stronger systems to collect data and information from our food & hospitality sectors. There is scope for an annual ‘State of Play’ report, which would provide useful information on the growth and development of the city’s food & hospitality industries, to business owners & policy-makers
Lockdown 2: October-December 2020

• When second lockdown was announced at the end of October, it was clear that our community food initiative would be needed again

• We re-opened the ‘feed-me’ pages of our website for public enquiries

• We re-started deliveries of weekly food boxes and ready-meals, taking referrals from Project Mama, Bristol Refugee Rights, Bristol City Council, Armed Voluntary Services & our website. We served a minimum of 100 families per week throughout second lockdown.

• The Gallimaufry Pub on Gloucester Road became our fourth temporary food hub

• Public donations were much lower over second lockdown. A Bristol City Council grant from the winter emergency food fund was essential to enabling this second wave of activity to go ahead

• It was no longer appropriate to ask staff to volunteer time on the project. 6 existing team members were offered temporary, freelance agreements for 1 day per week over November and December
Lockdown 2: stats

• 1764 nutritious ready-meals were delivered to low-income or covid-positive households

• 2110 weekly food provision boxes, including a full week of essentials (plus fresh fruit & veg box) were delivered to vulnerable or covid-positive households

• We spent £14,190 on our winter food campaign. £9,240 came as a grant from the city’s winter food fund, the rest from donations through our crowdfunder

• The project was only possible due to a significant amount of human resource volunteered by the public to pack, drive and deliver food provisions to those in need. This is not a sustainable model in the longer-term
Christmas Campaign 2020

- We launched the ‘Bristol Food Box’ campaign – selling ‘Bristol Food’ Hampers made-up of items from high-quality, independent food producers. The public could buy a small box for £35.00 or a large box for £55.00. In addition, they were invited to donate a Christmas food hamper on behalf of a family in need.

- We sold 336 Bristol Food Boxes

- The public donated 451 Christmas food boxes for families in need

- The council commissioned the Food Union to supply 300 Christmas boxes for the foster-care leaver community, and 300 boxes for adult foster carers (in collaboration with B&A church)

- Over 1,000 Christmas food hampers were distributed to families across Bristol in the week before Christmas
Christmas campaigns: learnings

- Strong demand in the marketplace for an ethical, Bristol food hamper
- Short lead-in and minimal promotional budget highlights what could be achieved with more time and resources
- Lots of corporates got involved and gave hampers as Christmas gifts. Strong potential to grow this area of the campaign in future years
- Strong desire for public participation and volunteering at Christmas. More offers than jobs available.
- Good potential to develop the campaign for future years
What next for Bristol Food Union?

- New community interest company incorporated in August 2020
- Activity is stopping temporarily for the first quarter of 2021 while we write and fund our business plan
- Our new website and industry membership will re-launch on March 18th, 2021
- With thanks to the city of Bristol, the council, and all those who make up our extraordinary food community, for their willingness to collaborate in the face of the coronavirus pandemic
- What was achieved only serves to highlight the potential of our city’s food and hospitality sectors to contribute to an ambitious citywide vision to build a regenerative, regional food economy. One that delivers economic resilience for food and farming enterprises, whilst also contributing to the regional food security our citizens need for the future.